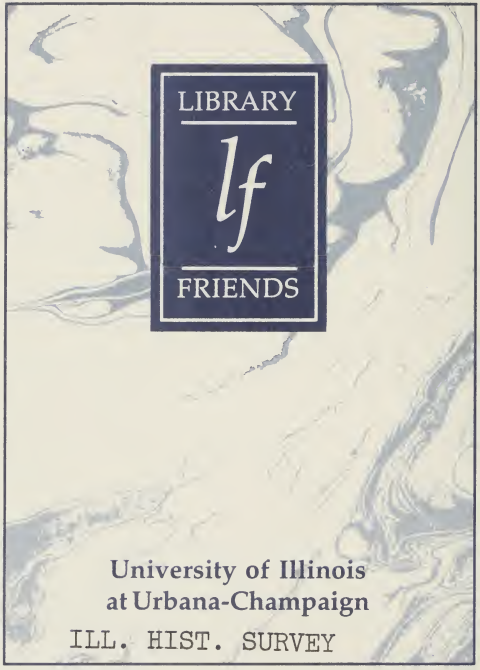
A LETTER FROM THE FIRE

FOSTER



Presented to H Sears Thomson
by the Son of Thos. D. Foster,
W. Henry Foster 1925.

A LETTER FROM THE FIRE

THOMAS D. FOSTER

From a photograph taken in London, Can., shortly after the Chicago Fire

A LETTER FROM THE FIRE

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE

WRITTEN IN 1871

BY

THOMAS D. FOSTER

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INTRODUCTION

Since the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, now slumbering eternally beneath the waters of the Dead Sea, the pages of history have been illumined at intervals by the glare of mighty conflagrations, and the Fire Fiend has never ceased to exact his toll from the world's most famous cities.

In the year 504 B.C. the Ionians and Athenians burned Sardis, once one of the most splendid and opulent cities of the East; one hundred and seventy-six years later Alexander the Great startled the world when he applied the torch to the wonderful marble palaces of Persepolis, which, with the greater portion of the city, were reduced to a heap of blackened ruins.

On the night of July 18, 64 A.D., an

insignificant blaze caught in some wooden booths at the south end of the Circus Maximus, in the city of Rome. This fire, spreading rapidly and unchecked, burned itself out when it reached the Tiber and the solid barrier of the Servian Wall; then it started afresh in another section, and when finally quenched, after eight days, had destroyed over two-thirds of the Eternal City, but then little past the zenith of its power and glory. From a political viewpoint, this was the most important fire in all history, for it marked the beginning of the downfall of Nero, whose suicide a few years later ended the line of the Caesars. Gossip had it that Nero — monster of ungovernable passion — started the fire himself, but historians are uncorroborative; nor is it likely that he "fiddled while the city burned."

In the year 70, Titus burned Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon. Josephus tells us that over one million

people perished in the holocaust by fire and sword.

In more modern times the great fire of London holds the center of the stage. In extent and results it was not unlike the Chicago fire of two centuries later. How little does man profit by the lessons and the losses of the past! London burned for four days and five-sixths of the City within the walls was consumed.

Other notable fires that might be mentioned are those which devastated Constantinople in 1778-82; Moscow in 1812, and Hamburg in 1842. The first great fire in the United States occurred in New York in 1835. Boston in 1872 suffered a loss of $75,000,000, and in 1906 San Francisco was visited by earthquake and fire that took five hundred lives and wiped out property variously estimated at from three hundred and fifty to five hundred millions of dollars.

Possibly no fire of modern times has

received as much publicity as the one which swept over Chicago on Sunday night, October the 8th, 1871, and the following day. Exactly who was responsible for starting the fire is a matter of conjecture, but until about a dozen years ago it was generally believed that an obstreperous cow, belonging to a certain Mrs. O'Leary, was the culprit. Now cows in history, from the time of the Golden Calf, have oftener been infamous than otherwise, and Mrs. O'Leary's had been no exception until Michael Ahern, reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, who had "covered" the fire at the time and had known Mrs. O'Leary well, by publishing the real facts in 1921, removed the stigma of fifty years memory and restored her bovine ladyship to her rightful place in the annals of cowdom.

To be sure, Mrs. O'Leary had a cow; in fact she had five of them. She was a truthful woman, and a few days after

the fire, while her movements on that memorable Sunday night were still fresh in her memory, she branded the cow story as a fabrication, and positively disproved it by the testimony of a neighbor who discovered the fire in Mrs. O'Leary's cowshed, after she and her family had retired. Ahern's story runs: "There was a social gathering in the neighborhood that night in honor of the arrival of a young man from Ireland. One of those present told me in after years that two women of the party went to the O'Leary shed to get some milk for punch. One woman held a lighted lamp while the other milked the cow. They thought they heard someone coming, and in their haste to escape, the lamp was dropped, setting fire to the place. This, I believe, was the true cause of the fire."

Thomas D. Foster, whose story of the Great Fire is here published for the first time, was a young man of twenty-

four when he arrived in Chicago, from London, Canada, in September, 1871, for the purpose of establishing a packing plant for John Morrell & Co. Ltd., of Liverpool, by whom he was employed. The down town offices of the firm had just been opened in the building situated on the southwest corner of Clark and Washington streets; this fell a prey to the flames and was entirely consumed. A small packing house, located at Archer Avenue and Quarry Street, had been leased from the owner, and this was not harmed; and although the fire delayed the beginning, packing operations were actively carried on during the winter of 1871-2.

Foster writes that he was staying at the Briggs House. This was situated on Randolph Street at Wells, and was one of the prominent hotels of the city. Wm. S. Walker in his *Description of the Great Fire*, published in 1872, gives us this picture: "Spinning along Ran-

dolph Street the conflagration fed heartily on the glories of the Briggs, Sherman, Metropolitan, and Matson hotels; upon stately business houses, Woods Museum, and a miscellanny of trade edifices that of themselves would have formed the heart of a small city." It was in this "heart of a small city"—in the very center of the "furnace in which stone buildings melted like so much lead"—that Foster's adventures began.

It was Hallowe'en, three weeks after the fire, before he was able to settle down to write a full account of his experiences for the folks overseas. Even then, writing must have been difficult, for he had "no desk, and no fire." What became of the original letter or manuscript is not known; after being read by the members of the family it was passed around among relatives and afterwards loaned, over and over again, to friends in the neighborhood. Requests for it became so numerous that a copy had to

be made, and it is this copy that has been preserved to the present day. This account has been carefully compared with authentic records published immediately after the fire, and in no case have any important discrepancies been discovered.

Order followed chaos; the citizens formed themselves into Home Guards under General F. T. Sherman, and Foster patrolled a beat on State Street, with a rifle over his shoulder, from midnight until four A.M. Later, the city was put under military control with Lieutenant-General Philip H. Sheridan commanding.

In 1830 Chicago had a population of 70; at the time of the fire it had grown to 300,000, then

> "Men clasped each other's hands and said, 'The City of the West is dead',"

and little did they think as they viewed the desolation of three thousand acres

sown with ashes, that from those ashes was to rise, within a generation, a new "City of the West" with a population ten fold, and which was destined to take its place as one of the three greatest cities of the world.

T. Henry Foster

Ottumwa, Iowa
October 9, 1923

A LETTER FROM THE FIRE

All Hallowe'en,
October 31, 1871,
Chicago, Ill.

My dear Father and Mother:

I am ashamed to put you off any longer without a long letter. I have been waiting to get the office comfortable so that I could spend some evening in it, when it would be nice and warm, and give you a longer account of the fire. We are into the middle of another week, no desks, and no fire, so muffle myself up, and collect my thoughts the best way I can. For a beginning, we should heve been very busy today, with salt, but it is raining very hard, and is altogether a miserable day both

out and inside, so cannot find anything better to do, although it is not pleasant work.

To begin — on Saturday morning the 7th of this month, I saw Mr. Ackroyd off to Milwaukee, and came back with Mr. Kenny.

The three of us were stopping at different hotels, therefore Mr. Kenny went to his, I to the Brigg's house, and got my tea, then went to the Sherman house where Mr. Ackroyd had been stopping, to get his trunk and have it sent to my room at the Brigg's house. After that was done I took my usual Saturday evening stroll, 'round the city, just ready to look at anything interesting. Nothing happened; but just as I was going into the hotel, at ten o'clock, there was the glare of a fire in the sky. I did not feel like going to bed, so thought I might spend an hour looking at the flames. It was a big fire in my eyes then, a large wooden house

near a row of splendid brick ones; the latter they were trying to save, and succeeded. I was in a splendid position for seeing, without getting any of the water the firemen directed at the crowd every few minutes. It was nearly over, and I was just going to leave, when some one shouted that there was a fire on the west side. I looked up, saw the sky all lurid, and started off to see the new one. It looked very awful, sweeping houses before it like chaff, until it got to a lumber yard. Then the efforts of the firemen appeared useless, twenty acres of buildings and wood were all ablaze; the sight thrilled me through, as I thought there would be no stopping it. I assisted people to carry things out of their houses, and did what I could to help them, until the fire appeared to be so far under way that there was no further danger. I hung 'round until two o'clock then went home, got into bed, satisfied I had seen a tremendous

calamity. The biggest of any I had ever seen, or hoped to see. But alas, how much was I disappointed! I could not sleep for a long time, and then only dozed off for a few minutes, but woke with a start, and looking out of the window, saw how the fire was progressing. Whilst awake I was thinking what a splendid account I could write you. When anything of interest occurs it is my first thought — how nice that will do for my letter home. I always have you uppermost in my mind and wish you were with me to enjoy things when I am enjoying myself — but this is parting from my story.

When I saw the fire fade, I fell asleep (it was about four-thirty) and did not wake until Mr. Kenny came to my door at ten. I had made an appointment to meet him at that hour, and kept it as you see — "in bed." After he left I slept until twelve, then got up, dressed, went down, met Mr. Kenny again, and

we both started off to Mr. Small's to dine. At five-twenty we left there and walked together to my hotel; we parted, and I did not see him again until twenty-six hours after, he thinking me burnt, and I thinking that he was burnt. We were very pleased to see each other again safe and sound.

I got my tea, went to my room, and read awhile, then went to Church; it happened to be a Universalist place that I got into, and did not enjoy it much. I went away kind of dissatisfied and got to the Briggs House at nine-fifteen, not feeling like sleeping. I made myself as comfortable as I could, lit my pipe, and commenced reading the book Mrs. Somerville made me a present of. I had been reading about half an hour when the fire bell tolled three-forty-two three times. I looked out and saw the sky red in the direction of the fire of the previous evening, but paying no attention to it, I turned round and read away.

I looked again and saw it was increasing; I tried to read now but it was impossible. I put down the gas, and sat opposite the window watching it; the fire was more than two miles away, still I felt very uneasy, and could not go to bed. It was Sunday night and I did not like the idea of going on a rollicking expedition after a fire, but I could not make myself easy anywhere, and I concluded to go see it; so I took off my Sunday clothes, put on a pair of drawers (I felt chilly the night before, so took the precaution to make myself warm this night, and it was well for me I did as my story will show during its progression), an extra undershirt, an old warm coat and vest, and sallied out at ten-fifteen P.M. October eighth.

It was blowing hard at the time, but I got along well, having fit myself out for cold and dirt; having little interest in the city, no friends whose losing property could affect me much, and little

property of my own to care for, I felt probably as free and easy as any one who saw that fire.

I got up to it at ten-forty-five, but could not get near on account of the heat. How the firemen stood it I don't know! A general alarm was sounded and thirty steam fire engines were on the spot soon after I arrived. It was a grand sight but hellish in the extreme; streets, houses, trees, and everything in one grand furnace. It was not a blaze like the night before, but a white melting heat; volumes of flames were cut off from the seat of the fire itself and carried over into other streets. In addition to this there was a perfect shower of sparks, all red and glowing. The fall of them was like a fall of golden snow, and as far as the eye could reach upward, the air was filled with them; not only sparks, but burning brands of wood from six inches to two feet long, and from one inch thick to six inches.

This may seem incredible but it is true. I saw them myself, saw them fall in the street, and worse than that, on houses with wooden roofs, and on people's heads, almost knocking them down. The wind was blowing a fearful gale at this time and that accounts for it.

At eleven-fifteen these brands set fire to the roof of a church about three hundred yards from the main fire. I went to see this before there was the sign of a blaze; (I adopted the plan of keeping before the fire, so that in case it spread I should not be cut off from my hotel) some men got on the roof and tried to put it out but they could not. So an engine came, and dilly-dallied about for a few minutes, until a volume of thick black smoke rolled up from it and in two minutes it was in flames. The edifice was wood and it went like a matchbox; it was a Roman Catholic institution. Some one said it was on fire before any sign of a blaze came from it;

an old Irish woman that had just come heard the remark and asked: "Where is the foire?" They told her on the roof. "Ah," said she, "God will put it out," and appeared quite composed about it. This is where the real trouble commenced.

There were two immense fires now, and the fire brigade divided. This left the first fire almost to itself, and in a few minutes it joined the second one; the sight was now dreadful. It swept along, burning wood, bricks, stone, alike; I never saw the equal. The two latter materials gave out sooner than the wood; they melted down like wax, while wood burned so long as a stick remained. It flew from house to house almost as quick as one could walk, until it reached the river.

I will stop about the fire now and tell you something of the inhabitants, a great many being burnt out, the fire

having come a mile now, and half a mile wide. The people were mostly looking at the fire, but as soon as they saw their homes in danger, a general packing up could be observed in all the houses, and soon after a regular exodus, everyone, old and young, carrying something. The men looked pale and callous as a rule; the women ran about in an excited manner, but none fainted. Children clung to parents, or old friends, too frightened to cry; infants alone made noise, as the mothers had not time to sit down and soothe them. Others of them slept peaceably in the mothers' arms, ignorant of all danger and care. Old women were carrying weights too heavy for men, and young women were dragging trunks (enough for a donkey to pull), no doubt containing their best clothes, or sat on them and wept quietly when they could not pull any longer, and had to leave them for the fire to lick up as a giant would swallow a midge.

I was not an idle observer during all this. I carried boxes and bundles without number, placing them in nooks that the owners considered safe. Vain delusion. Everything I laid hands to save was eventually burnt. In one place there was a long train of empty railway cars. People thought the railway company would be sure to save their cars, so they would put in their goods. I worked as I never worked before, loading up the cars with all kinds of things, but before I had finished the train was on fire and it burnt up as would a train of gunpowder on the flags. This was my last act of kindness on the West side; it being close to the river, I crossed over to what is called the South side.

To return to the fire account. After crossing the river, I stood and gazed on the burning mass. It was thought it could not cross eighty yards of water. The firemen made a hard fight here to

prevent its going any further, and it looked somewhat as if they might succeed. At this point I left, a fire having broken out behind me about four hundred yards away. This was on the side of the river I was on, so there was no doubt but that the fire had crossed. Of course this took away a lot of engines and left the old fire to do as it liked; it soon jumped the river too, and joined the new one. I went to see this new fire and found it to be among a nest of wooden shanties that went like tinder. Upon close observation I saw that it was within a few yards of the gas works, so thought it better to quit and plant myself at a reasonable distance from it. In going away I took the liberty of hammering people up, as the fire was spreading so rapidly it might reach them before all of them could get out. The streets were all quiet as I passed along, but soon were busy enough with people turning out. I was

also busy enough assisting to put out little fires, such as linen awnings that sparks had ignited, and pieces of wooden side walks that were burning, until I got to the heart, and best part of the city where all buildings were built of brick, stone, iron, or marble, and many of them without any wood except the office desks and furniture. I felt sure the fire would never go through these buildings; still to make my mind easy, I went to the Brigg's House, and commenced packing. This was one o'clock, wind still blowing a gale, the fire within a quarter of a mile from the hotel, and just beginning to cross the street to the good part of the city. Although I was packing, I really did not believe the fire would reach the place where I was.

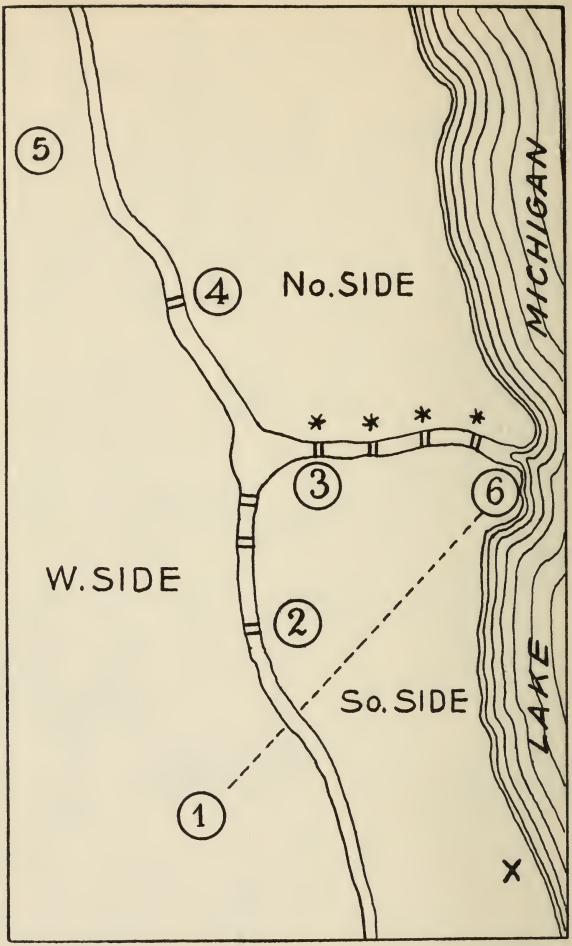
I will give you an idea of how my packing arrangements were made. I first got my small valise with the brass round the edges, put into it my best suit,

album, and all the little presents that I value, then filled up with the best of my underclothing; after that I took off the old suit I had on, and put on my second best suit, so that if it came to the worst I could carry the valise in my hand, and have a good suit on my back. At this juncture, a waiter of the hotel came running up, saying the wind had changed and there was no danger. I paid little attention to it and went on packing my large trunk; certainly it made me more careless in packing, for I left out a lot of small things, I could have put in, thinking if the place should be threatened I could then put them in. After I fastened all up, leaving out my large overcoat, I again walked out to see the progress of the fire. It had taken full possession of the fine buildings I before mentioned. It was surprising to see the way they tumbled; marble buildings cracked away for a time, then burst out in a volume of

flame; the walls parted, and down came the whole fabrication a jumbled mass of smouldering ruins. This took but little time, but short as it was, before it was in ruins, other buildings were burning and tumbling in the same way. I was watching in one place, when a cry was raised that the City Hall was on fire. I never thought that this would burn, as it stands in a little park, and is built of stone. I ran round and there sure enough the cupola was burning, and very soon after, the edifice was a red, seething mass, sending up clouds of sparks, and dealing destruction, with a deadly hand, all 'round.

I now thought it about time to move, and see after my things, so commenced lugging them downstairs; I had not time now to put anything into the trunk, so let the few things left take their chance. I had with me one valise, one large portmanteau of my own, and one large trunk belonging to Mr. Ack-

royd (had he left it at Sherman's House it was gone sure as I could never have saved it). When I had them down, I went to look for a carriage or an express man, to take them away; they were asking fifty dollars for a carriage; as this would not do I went up the street a piece, met a man with a light waggon, asked what he would take me a mile away for. He said five dollars down. "Done," I said. He wanted to get the money in the street before he got the things; of course I would not do that, but told him, I would pay him the minute I got the things on board. After a good deal of talk he consented, came alongside, put the packages on and I paid him. Just as I was leaving the place took fire, and I heard people offering one hundred dollars, then one hundred and fifty dollars, for a carriage, but they could not get any. As I was going along several people applied to the express-man offering him three or


5
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four dollars for the conveyance of a trunk, but ten dollars was now his charge. People refused to pay him that amount and I am sure they all lost their things, as we were about the last to cross the bridge. We took up one young man with a similar lot of traps to mine. He was a very decent fellow, so we stuck together. The express-man put us down at his own house. We left our things inside, and went to see how the fire was getting along.

Before going further I will explain why I crossed the river again, and what we did. To do this I must give you an idea of the place. I remember once before giving you a rough outline of Chicago. I will do so again. [See illustration.]

The bars across the river represent the turn bridges. 1 is where the fire commenced, 2 where I crossed the river the first time, 3 where I crossed the second, 4 where I crossed the third, 5

where I finally drew up and left my clothes. The wind was blowing in the direction from 1 to 6, so I thought the fire would wear out at the lake, and not be able to cross the river to the North Side. In this I was mistaken, for when I went to look at the fire, after depositing our things at the express-man's house, as before stated, we found the bridge we had just crossed was on fire, and that the North Side was doomed unless the wind changed (this was three o'clock) so we turned back to move our traps again. Whilst walking up, we met a man pulling a large trunk. We helped him along to where we were staying, hired a boy with a waggon who drove over to the West Side, crossing bridge at number 4. Here we considered ourselves safe, put down our luggage on the side walk, and sat on it 'till daylight. We asked a man to let us into his house but he refused. It was here that my

warm underclothing and heavy overcoat stood to me. The wind was brisk and keen; had I been lightly clothed, I might have taken a severe cold — fortunately I escaped. This place was partly on the prairie, so had a splendid view of the fire at large, although fully three miles from it. The smallest print could be read with ease, the light was so intense. As day dawned the light faded, but daylight revealed the volumes of black smoke rolling up from the city, and the ruins of the previous night's destruction. The fire was now sweeping the North Side entirely unchecked, the waterworks being burnt and no water in the town. I felt very hungry by this time, and hailed with delight the taking down of the first shutter of a small grocery store. I got some dry biscuits and ate them with a relish — something wonderful. As there was a dirt waggon passing, our last named friend and my-

self stopped it, put in our things, got on top of them, and requested the driver to take us to a place my friend knew.

He accomodated us, and drew up at a very good looking general store in a small settlement on the prairie, shown as number 5 on the map. It ought to be farther out, but the paper won't admit it. We gave our baggage in charge of the owners, and left them.

In walking back to the city we met a gentleman who was acquainted with my fellow traveller. He wished us to call at his house and have breakfast. We did so, and a good one it was; the house was all upset, getting their things packed up, little of which I am afraid was saved. Walking citywards, the road was crowded with all sorts of vehicles carrying furniture of every description; the road was littered with furniture, pianos, beds and so forth in indescribable confusion; drivers of waggons would engage to take it out

some distance on the prairie, get their money first before they started, then would only go a little way, tumble it out on the road, return and repeat the operation on someone else.

I now wanted to get to Mr. Small's house, to learn what I could about Mr. Kenny. When I got to the city I found all the bridges that I have starred, burnt up, so had to make a long detour, going all round the burnt district. His house is on the South Side where I put a cross. I arrived there at eleven o'clock lost in dirt, blended with dust and smoke. Not a drop of water in the house to wash with. Mr. Small told me to consider it (his house) my home until I could find something else. I took a bucket, went to the lake and brought it back full of water and felt better for it. (This was eleven-thirty A.M.) Up to this time nothing was heard of Mr. Kenny. I felt rather uneasy, as it was much easier for him to get there than

for me, and I fully expected finding him there when I arrived. I was also astonished to find the South Side still burning; the fire was creeping up against the wind at the rate of a house every five minutes. At that calculation Small's house would be burnt at three o'clock. Of course he was very uneasy and sent his wife and baby away; if the wind changed in the opposite direction he would be cleared out much sooner. At two o'clock we walked down together and found the flames stopped by blowing up of several streets of houses. The North Side was swept out clear and clean, right into the country, burning up Lincoln Park and a Catholic Cemetery. Seventy-five thousand people resided on the North Side, and every house with one exception was burned to the ground, not even the walls standing. Altogether one hundred thousand people were rendered homeless, and had to

camp out on the prairie without any covering for two days and two nights, having little to eat and scarcely any water to drink. This is something awful to think of. Delicate people, young children of all classes, huddled together without any comforts; a great many people died, and no wonder. However, they are all pretty well provided for now, supplies are plentiful, the only fear is that the charity will be abused.

The fire lasted thirty-six hours, during that time clearing everything before it for a distance of five and a half miles, commencing in a point, and finishing two miles in width; about fifty thousand tons of coal caught fire, which burned for a week quite bright, always keeping the sky aglow with its light. It is still burning but no fire can be seen. I must add here that Mr. Kenny did not turn up the whole afternoon, and I began to fear the worst. However he

made his appearance between seven and eight o'clock, all safe and sound and relieved my mind. Next day the city was put under martial law, General Sheridan commanding. I was made a patrol between twelve and four o'clock at night with Small; this was to prevent ruffians from firing other places. Several of them were caught and immediately shot, or hung up to some lamp post. The city was without water ten days and fourteen without gas, so it presented a miserable appearance.

Mr. Kenny and myself went to the lake twice a day, and brought as much water as supplied Mr. Small's family. This was the way we paid our board. People a long way from the lake suffered fearfully; all the watering carts were put to hauling water, but all they could draw was only a speck of what was needed.

I have given you a pretty fair ac-

count of my experience during the fire, now I will give you a few incidents or curiosities. In the first place, I was greatly amused by the unlikely things that many people in their excitement tried to save the very first. On the West Side the rage appeared to be to save their stores and crockery. As soon as a house was threatened, the first thing brought out was a stove, then a lot of tins and glassware; in other places I saw people open their windows up stairs, and throw out looking glasses, chairs, water pitchers and basins, all of which were broken and rendered useless the moment they touched the ground. In some streets the pavement was littered with debris of this kind; when the fire got amongst the stores, cabmen, expressmen, and roughs in general were dressed up in much better style than usual. A large number of silk hats being particularly observable on the

gents, showing plainly that some stores had suffered. A lot of prisoners locked up in the City Jail were let loose; the first thing they did was to run over to the jewellry stores and plunder them of all the valuables that were convenient. Many of the store owners saved what they could, then opened the doors and told the multitude to help themselves. One of the largest jewellers out of New York did this, and a few lives were sacrificed in his place; people being so venturesome that they went once too often, and got caught with a falling building. One piano store owner commenced pulling pianos out of a third story window. This was the worst piece of business that I saw for they were smashed into splinters when they struck the ground, and greatly endangered the lives of people around. Pistols were freely used, a great many ruffians were shot for trying to break

into different places, and in return, a few respectable men were shot by them, for preventing them carrying out their purpose. One expressman that we employed was going to drop our things out on the street after he got a few yards when one of my newly made acquaintances drew his revolver, and told him he would blow his brains out if he did. He drove quietly on after that.

A great many lives were lost, more than ever will be known. A lot of people congregated in the tunnel under the river (that I have described in a previous letter) and most of them were smothered or burned. There were two things that helped the fire along wonderfully. They were the wooden pavements and the quantity of things thrown out of the houses and left there.

This ends my account. All being well, I will continue my usual weekly

letter from this out. I am very well and hope you are the same, with kindest love to yourselves, Annie, and Alfred,

I remain your affectionate son,

THOMAS.

You may show this letter to anyone you think would be interested in it. I cannot begin to write another so minute as this.